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ABSTRACT

Addressed to junior and senior high school students, this beginning guide for writing speeches, research papers, and book reports outlines the processes of selecting a subject, organizing material and ideas, and beginning and ending a writing assignment. Offered as a supplement to classroom writing instruction, the guide assumes parental cooperation and involvement and suggests methods to stimulate creative thinking. (AEA)

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the Student Writer

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By Rexine M. Hayes

A BEGINNING GUIDE FOR WRITING THEMES, STORIES, REPORTS AND OTHER REQUIRED LITERARY WORKS

INCLUDING:

- THE GREAT THEME SCHEME
- SPEECH WRITING
- RESEARCH PAPERS
- BOOK REPORTS
- USING THE CREATIVE PROCESS

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY WORD TO PARENTS

SUGGESTED FOR JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

GRADES 7 THROUGH 10

CS 205/22

FOREWORD

June 1979

It is a matter of great importance to me, and the State Board of Education, that students develop effective writing skills. The minimum standards require that students demonstrate competence in writing before they receive their diplomas. In addition, I am asking schools to increase the amount of time devoted to teaching writing.

Mrs. Rexine M. Hayes, of Beavercreek, Clackamas County, developed this delightful booklet. It contains many helpful ideas for teachers and parents who wish to help youngsters improve their writing skills. She has granted permission to the Department of Education to reprint and distribute the booklet to Oregon schools.

I commend Mrs. Hayes for the fine work she has done, and I thank her for sharing it with us.

Verne A. Duncan
State Superintendent of
Public Instruction

PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS

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A Word to the Parents

There is almost nothing about a school writing assignment that excites the average student. At the very least it becomes a halting, boring effort to say something about anything in a single paragraph. At the most, it involves researching a subject, organizing notes and putting everything together in a readable form -- a prospect which throws many a student into deep depression.

Learning to write is a highly individual process. You bring to the art of writing only the language tools you have developed thus far. Whatever has eluded you about the English language will also desert you here, whether it be spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structures, or a general inability to express yourself adequately via the written word.

During the school year it often proves impossible for teachers to give individual instruction in writing. Time is the enemy. There is too much material to be covered in nine months in the classroom. Working on writing skills to any depth beyond the rules of grammar is often one of the casualties. The developing writer must write several hundred words at least once a week either in completing school writing assignments or in home writing projects. If writing activities are few and far between, progress is minimal or nonexistent.

To help make up for this omission when it occurs, I have put together The Student Writer to supplement classroom instruction. The Great Theme Scheme by itself was tested among 7th and 8th grade students during the 1977-78 school year and reviewed by English teachers in both junior and senior high schools. Where the student was motivated to read the guidelines, the ideas were helpful and gave the budding writer a needed boost. The biggest disadvantage to the Scheme was the reluctance of too many students to read anything beyond the required textbook assignments.

In preparing this final version with additional sections, I kept in mind both the needs of the prospective writer and the lack of enthusiasm for reading long articles. The entire booklet sets forth simple but thorough guidelines which conform to good writing practices. It does not tell students all there is to know about writing, it merely gets them started. It may even inspire you to try a little writing yourself!

My suggestion is that you go over the contents a section at a time with your child, showing how it can be used as a guide for writing. When each school assignment is finished, go over it carefully with him or her, discussing errors in spelling, grammar and word usage and how they may be corrected. Try to lead them into discovering errors rather than just telling them what is wrong. The combination of your help as resident instructor and critic plus the actual writing experience will almost certainly exert a good influence on your child's efforts. If students sidestep these writing assignments or do only as little as possible, no progress in learning to express

themselves clearly will be made. Later, as adults, they will be at the mercy of those who have learned to use the English language to advantage.

Working with your child can give him or her enough encouragement and momentum to become an independent and self-disciplined writer. Your son or daughter might even come to enjoy writing once some of the mysteries of creating an original composition are known.

This booklet does not try to explain rules of grammar or the structuring of sentences (syntax), nor do I enlarge on the creative aspects of writing. My object is a more limited one, but important to the timid, uncertain writer: How to organize time and effort in getting needed information together, and a simple system to assist the student in putting together a written assignment or speech.

For the reluctant writer (who may also be a reluctant reader) The Student Writer is meant to be an opening wedge in the art of self-expression. If your child has not progressed beyond simple sentences, he or she needs more help at home than this booklet covers. There are many ways to improve poor writing skills depending on age, grade, and ability of the child.

For those of you who seek further help for home teaching, I enthusiastically recommend Any Child Can Write by Harvey S. Wiener, Ph.D. (McGraw-Hill Book Company,1978). Other books I have found most helpful are The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (The MacMillan Company, 1972, second edition) and Simple & Direct by Jacques Barzun (Harper & Row Publishers, 1975).

Rexine M. Hayes
Beavercreek, Oregon

January, 1979

THE GREAT THEME SCHEME

To Students:

To those of you who dread writing assignments because you don't know where or how to start, the Great Theme Scheme gives you some ideas on

(1) How to pick a subject
(2) How to get yourself organized to write a paper
(3) How to start it
(4) How to end it,

with some helps and hints along the way.

HOW TO USE THIS SECTION:

With each writing assignment, use the Scheme as a guide to planning and writing your paper. You will notice that suggestions for writing stories are marked with a square ▽△ and suggestions for writing themes or reports are marked with a ○ .

To give yourself a head start, read the entire Scheme before beginning your first writing assignment.

....

Some very good suggestions and helpful comments were given by Pete McHugh, elementary school teacher and principal.

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THE GREAT THEME SCHEME: Phase I

Are You Ready for This?

1. Face the truth.

Your teacher has announced the assignment: Write a theme, 200 words, due Thursday.

You can (a) get started, (b) put it off, (c) leave town.

To keep putting it off not only makes the job bigger than it is but results in a poorly written paper. Leaving town is a temporary solution. Sooner or later you have to come home, if only for clean socks.

So with every assignment, face the awful truth:

YOU MUST WRITE A PAPER!

You may even get to like it.

2. Pick a subject.

"What do I write about?"
"My mind is a blank!"
"Nothing on the list looks good."
"I can't think of a thing."

STORIES

Always write about what you know. Choose a true happening in your life as the basis of your story. You can either then "tell it like it was," or add to the happening by using your imagination. Quite often books of fiction are based on fact. Learn to observe and remember what is going on around you. Telling about the interesting or funny things a pet animal does, for instance, makes a good story. A family adventure, even though it may have happened before you were born, can be the basis for a story.

THEMES OR REPORTS

Choose a subject that interests you, if only slightly. If you think of your subject in a dull way, you will write about it in a dull way. The challenge is to find something exciting or at least of some interest to you in any subject you choose.

If there is no list to choose from, decide to write about something that can be told in the required number of words or pages. Discuss kite flying, not the history of airplanes. It means the difference between writing a short report and writing a book. Besides, fitting a big subject on a few pages is a difficult task. The years between the Wright Brothers and the first airplane, and the building of the Boeing 747 need and deserve a lot more space!

3. Make an outline.

"You can't tell the players without a program!" Have you ever heard that shouted at a ballgame? That's what an outline is: a program of what comes next in the story or report you are writing.

To be able to write a clearly understood paper, you must first decide what you are going to say and in what order you will say it.

STORIES

Now is a good time to think about the plot or "problem" of your story. Before you start writing, know what your characters are going to do and make notes to yourself, or an outline, accordingly. Be sure that your writing follows those notes or outline. Don't leave your reader wondering "what happened?" at the end of your story.

THEMES OR REPORTS

If you really want to do a thorough job, you can make two outlines:

(1) A list of possible kinds of information you will want to look up when you go to the library.

a. How are kites made?
b. Who flies them?
c. Where do they fly them?
d. What are some of the favorite designs?
e. What are some of the rules of kite flying?

(2) A more detailed list of the information you have found.

A. Kites are popular all over the world.
   1. Asian countries
      (a) Japan
      (b) China
      (c) Korea
   2. United States
      (a) contests
      (b) International Kitefliers Association

B. Special kite celebrations.

C. Shapes
   1. box kites
   2. fish, birds, butterflies, dragons
   3. flat kites

D. Sizes
   1. tiny, fits in a matchbox
   2. large, many feet across

E. Rules

F. Other uses besides flying for fun.

4. Make a work schedule.

Before you even write your name, class and room number at the top of page one, have a work plan.

THEMES OR REPORTS

Do you need to refer to an encyclopedia, an autobiography or biography of your subject, or any special kind of reference book?

If so, ask yourself

(1) When shall I go to the library? _____

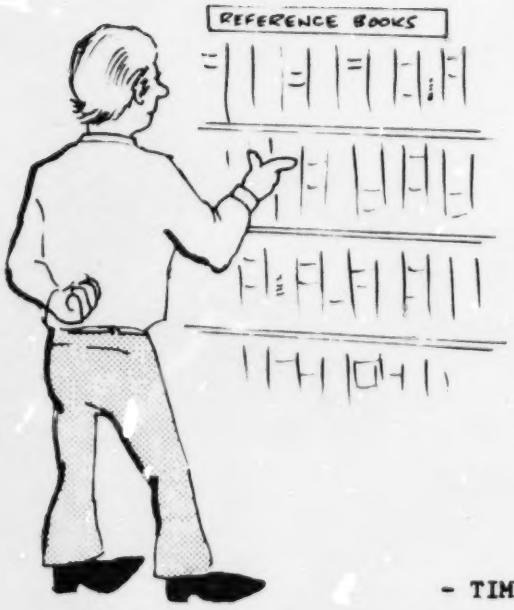
(2) How shall I keep a record of my references?

- 4x5 cards ☐
- list them on a piece of paper ☐
- trust my memory ☐ Did you really mark this one?

(3) How much time shall I spend getting my references together before I start to write?

- 2 hours ☐
- 2 days ☐
- 2 weeks ☐
- other ____ ☐

Just be sure that X (the time it takes) plus Y (writing time) equals Z (due date).



STORIES

THEMES OR REPORTS

How much time per day will you need to spend on actual writing to get it done on time?

- 15 minutes ☐
- 1 hour ☐
- 2 hours (straight time) ☐
- 2 hours (working during TV commercials only) ☐
- other _____ ☐

On the basis of your answers to the above questions, make a work plan or schedule on paper and

STICK TO IT!

- TIME OUT -

Before you start on your writing project, here are a couple of hints and helps:

Don't even think about making a final copy of your story, theme or report on the first try unless it is very short and you are filled with confidence. Plan to do a first draft or "rough," look it over carefully, and make needed changes. Check the spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing, and then write your final copy.

GLC

You are looking for information in reference books for your report. You find your subject covered at great length in two or three books. What next?

Using your outline (1), page 5, read through what you have found, looking especially for the kind of information you have on your list. You don't need <u>all</u> of the information you will find, so pick out that which is the most interesting to you. It isn't easy to do at first, because there seems to be so much to read through.

With practice you will get the hang of it and find yourself "seeing" sections, paragraphs, or even bits of information related to your subject. Your eyes pick out key words and you read these areas more carefully:

Kite flying.....all shapes, colors....contests...

.....flat kite.....launch a kite.....

- ON YOUR MARK, GET SET -

All right, you've picked your subject, made your outline, planned your work schedule. You have your reference notes in front of you and you are ready to start. So why can't you get started?

Try asking yourself some more questions:

(1) What am I writing about?

(2) What makes my subject interesting or different?

(3) Who is telling the story?

"While walking in the woods one day, I saw a...."

"While walking in the woods one day, the forest ranger saw a....."

What is the main action?

"...huge black bear attacking a...."

What best describes my subject as an introduction?

"Kite flying is enjoyed by children and grownups all over the world. Kites are made with a great deal of care and pleasure. The shapes and colors are many and the sizes are from tiny butterfly shapes to huge box kites."

(4) Why am I always talking to myself lately?

Sorry, it's all these questions.

Now you are ready to tackle your first paragraph.

Let's Go!

The opening paragraph is very important. It should get the reader's attention and tell him that the rest of what you have written is worth reading.

STORIES Set the scene for your plot or story plan. You may describe the location of your story and introduce one or more of the main characters:

"Green Mountain Springs was a lovely place to spend a summer. It was a small town, built along the slopes of Green Mountain, with a winter population of only 20 or 25 people. In the summer months, families from the city would sperd days or weeks in the cooler mountain climate, getting away from the heat down in the valley. Jerry lived in the Springs all year round, going to school at the county seat along with his younger sister, Mattie. They loved living so high up in the mountains, especially when the snow made it almost impossible to travel."

-- Now you are ready to develop your story.

Or, how about starting off with some action?

"It was a perfect winter day in the Rockies. The cold air felt good against Jerry's face as he climbed in the sunshine along the mountain trail behind the family cabin. His feet made a crunching noise in the snow but otherwise the day was silent. Suddenly the mountain air was filled with sound. Jerry looked up and saw an avalanche of snow coming straight for him! He started scrambling for safety...."

THEMES AND REPORTS

Begin your article as newspaper writers do: tell who, what, why, where, and sometimes how.

"A favorite breed of horse in the United States is the Palomino. Its ancestors are unknown but are believed to be similar to the Arabian horse. It is named for the Spanish conquistador (conqueror), Don Juan de Palomino, probably a comrade of Cortez, the Spanish explorer. The Palomino is liked not only for its color (shades of yellow or gold) but also for its regal bearing. Its size varies from 14.2 to 16.2 hands."

-- Such an opening paragraph pretty well covers the who, what, why and where.

Let's make it a little more exciting:

"In the New World, the horse was a latecomer almost unknown to the Indians. Picture in your mind the sight of

a beautiful, regal, golden animal with mane and tail of silver or gold color, with a strange, fair-skinned man sitting on his back. What a sight it must have been for the natives of what is now Mexico and Southwestern United States. The horse was called the Palomino, named for the Spanish conquistador, Don Juan de Palomino, comrade of Cortez, the Spanish explorer."

- NOW YOU'RE ROLLING -

Once you get past the first paragraph, the going is easier.

Referring to your outline or notes, stay with your story line or plot.

Use your outline as a guide to arranging your information from reference notes in a logical, interesting order.

Just remember not to wander off your subject. Don't get lost in a maze of unrelated facts or phrases.

- THE BIG FINISH -

The end is in sight and you are uncertain as to how to write your finish.

STORIES End with a bang not a whisper. Don't just let your story fade away, leaving the reader disappointed in how it all came out. Be sure that your story plot has come full circle. What you promised in the beginning should come true in the end. The final sentence can quote one of the characters, as in example:

"As Jerry looked over the mountain meadow now covered with ten feet or more of snow from the avalanche, he shook his head and said, "Never underestimate the power of a snowflake!"

THEMES AND REPORTS

If you have presented all the facts you want to present and stated your opinion, if any, about your subject, then quit.

"Ask any boy or girl who owns one. There is no animal quite so satisfying to raise as a horse, and the Palomino is one of the most gentle and beautiful ones to own and ride."

You shouldn't have to write "The End" after the last sentence. It should be clear from what you have written that you are through, done, finished.

- JUST A MINUTE -

Some hints and helps:

1. Watch out for too long sentences.
2. Check your spelling. If a word looks funny, look it up in the dictionary.
3. Make frequent paragraphs. These help the reader find his way through your paper.
4. Is your story or report too long? This almost never happens! But if it does, just take out the less interesting parts.

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5. Is it too short? This almost always happens with a report. Don't just stretch what you have, but go back to the library and get more information. If it's a story, add some action or description, being careful not to hurt your plot.

- THE ABLE LABEL -

Your last contribution to your story, theme, or report may be to give it a title, unless you did that first for inspiration. It should be fairly short and have some connection with the subject. This can be one of the fun parts of writing, the finishing touch.

You could use "Jerry's Exciting Experience," but what about "An Avalanche Is Snow Fun!" "My Horse" is short and to the point, but wouldn't "The Regal Palomino" be more descriptive?

HOORAY!

WHEE!

LET'S HEAR IT FOR _____ !
(Your Name)

Your final copy is made and you are ready to turn it in. Don't be shy about showing it to someone else: a willing parent, an older brother or sister, or some other family member. They can make a last check on spelling, punctuation and clearness.

If their corrections mean you must recopy your paper to have it right, then it's up to you to decide how important it is that you get a better grade.

- THE LAST WORD -

Writing original papers is fun, just as painting a picture that is all your own is fun, planting your own petunias is fun, and raising a pet gorilla is a lot of laughs. They are fun but they are work too.

When the day comes that you'd rather compose a poem or write a short story than watch television, then you are discovering the lasting pleasure that comes from <u>doing</u> rather than just <u>watching</u>.

Or else your TV set is broken.

WRITING A SPEECH

Have you been given a speech assignment? Or perhaps it is called "an informative talk." Deciding to be absent from school on the fateful day doesn't really solve your problem. Unless you plan to be a hermit in the hills, there will be any number of times in your life when you will want to speak up in public for reasons important to you and your friends or neighbors. Knowing in advance how to prepare and give an effective talk can make it much easier.

PREPARATION

With preparation comes confidence. Confidence gives you the will to live through the ordeal of giving a speech in front of your classmates. You may even give a good speech because you are prepared.

Method

You can choose one of two ways to prepare your speech:

1. Write your speech completely, putting down everything you expect to say on your subject in the allowed time.
2. Write short notes about your speech on 3x5 cards, to guide you through your talk.

No speech should be read word-for-word. If you choose the first method, memorize your speech so that a quick glance from time-to-time at your paper will be enough to refresh your memory. Either method requires enough practice before you are called upon so that you can cover your subject as planned in the time you have. Practising at home, timing yourself by the clock, also adds to your confidence later in front of your class.

Picking a Subject

As in writing a theme or story, we speak the easiest and with the most enthusiasm about subjects familiar to us. If you have a choice of subjects, choose one which means the most to you:

A family experience

A personal experience

A sport or other activity you enjoy

An idea you have (for school, for the community, etc.)

If you need to research your subject, rather than depending on your memory of personal events, preparation means study of one or more sources of information (library reference books, magazines, etc.). You must know your subject well before you can talk about it to others.

Building a Speech

Once you have your subject, keep these things in mind as you put your speech together:

1. Write for your audience. Are you addressing classmates in your English (history, social studies) class? Or are you making a bid for school office in the next election? Have you been chosen to welcome a group of parents? Or to tell a group of younger students how great it is to attend junior high or high school? Write accordingly, keeping in mind where their interests lie and how you might best hold their attention.

2. Outline your speech. This helps you to know where you are going with your subject and also to know where you have been.

3. Create an attention-getting opening to your speech. Grab the interest and attention of your audience at the beginning; it may be your last chance.

4. Stick to the main theme. Don't wander.

5. Write a good finish. Pull your thoughts together in a satisfying closing.

6. Time your speech. Be sure you are within the time limit allowed. Read or give your speech orally several times and watch the clock. If it is too long (this seldom happens), trim the unnecessary words or sentences. If it is too short, don't lengthen your speech with empty words and phrases. Add some new material or enlarge on what you have written so far.

It's Your Turn

When your name is called and your stomach is being destroyed by

BUTTERFLIES

take comfort in the fact that your classmates will be next. You are all in this together, so be kind to one another.

When you are in the audience, quiet attention to the speaker, short of taking a nap, helps him or her through an uncomfortable few minutes. Don't forget how it felt when you were standing up there.

Even with good preparation, you may not be rid of the butterflies, but giving a satisfactory speech leaves a great feeling of accomplishment when it is over. Each time you do it, the next time is easier. You did it before; you can do it again.

THE RESEARCH PAPER

A science experiment, whether performed in the school laboratory or by the kitchen sink at home, takes longer to describe on paper than to complete. This is because every step of the experiment is important and must be reported. If anyone else is to do exactly what you have done, called replication of the procedure, he or she must know exactly what you did.

Writing up an experiment forces you to see what you have done clearly enough to pass this information on to your reader. A research paper thus serves two important purposes:

1. You have a better understanding of what was accomplished in the experiment.
2. You have an accurate written record.

Keeping Notes and Lists

Before you start your experiment, be prepared to keep current notes on everything you do. It is the only way you will be certain that you are reporting completely and correctly on your methods, materials used, and the results.

From the beginning write down a complete list of the equipment and supplies you use.

Framework of a Report

A research paper, even a short one, should contain the following:

1. Title - make it as brief as possible and still give a good idea of what your experiment was about. Place your name underneath the title.
2. Introduction - what were you looking for, what did you expect to find, and why?

3. Materials and Methods - give a detailed description of the equipment and supplies you used, and the methods or procedures you followed.

4. Results - what happened?

5. Discussion - why do you think it happened? How does your experiment compare with other, similar work done elsewhere? What does your work prove?

Items 2, 3, 4, and 5 above will serve as sub-titles to divide your paper in sections. Use them in that order. Be careful to use the same verb tense throughout the paper, preferably the past tense.

References

Throughout your report you may wish to refer to other, published reports relating to your experiment. These references are listed at the end of your research paper in a form usually described by your science instructor, and will probably contain the following information:

1. Author(s) name
2. Title of report, article or book
3. Source: name of journal or book
4. Volume number
5. First and last page numbers of the article (or book chapter)
6. Year of publication
7. Publisher's name and city, country (books)

Sample reference style:

1. Penders, C.A. and Delwaide, P.J.: Blink reflex studies in patients with Parkinsonism before and during therapy. J. Neurol. Neurosurg. Psychiatry 34:674-678, 1971.

   (This reference is taken from the Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry, volume 34, pages 674 through 678, published in 1971.)

2. Brown, Barbara B. New Mind, New Body: Biofeedback: New Directions for the Mind. New York, Harper & Row, 1974, pp. 134-136.

   (The book title is "New Mind, New Body: Biofeedback: New Directions for the Mind." The publisher is Harper & Row in New York, published in 1974. Your article refers to just pages 134 through 136.)

Journal names are almost always abbreviated when cited in a reference list. When in doubt as to what the proper abbreviation is, spell the name in full. Take your information for your reference list directly from the journal or book. Always make a note of any reference material you use the first time you use it and keep this information with your research notes. It will save going back to the library later.

In the body of the text there are a number of ways to refer to your reference list. The sample reference #1 on page 15, for instance, could be cited simply as (1), or[1], or as (Penders and Delwaide, 1971). In the first two examples, your references are numbered in order of their appearance in the text. In the third example, your references are listed alphabetically by the first author's last name. In any case, do not cite (refer to) a reference in the text that is not in your reference list, and do not have a reference in your list that is not in the text!

Illustrations: Photographs, Figures and Tables

You may need to illustrate your research paper with one or two drawings or photographs, showing part of your method or experiment results. In your text, refer to all illustrations in these ways:

(Fig. 1) or (see Fig. 2); (Table 1); (Plate 1), etc.

A plate is a photograph. Figures are usually drawings, graphs or charts. A table shows data (information) in columns with headings, an easier way to present a lot of figures, measurements, etc. to the reader.

Photographs: Well-lighted, uncluttered background, close-in shot, black-and-white film.

Figures: Hand-drawn graph, scale or actual line drawing of some part of your experiment. Figures illustrate a fact or facts (data) or something described in your research paper, which you designed for this experiment.

Tables: Columns of data important to your results and referred to in your paper.

Legends: Written descriptions of each of the above used in your paper. They may be written below the illustration or on a separate sheet of paper. Tables with descriptive titles and column headings may not need a legend.

Assembling Your Research Paper

1. Title page
2. Text
3. References
4. Figures (numbered in order of appearance in the text: Fig. 1, 2, etc.)
5. Tables (numbered in order of appearance: Table 1, 2, etc.)
6. Photographs (numbered in order of appearance as Plate 1, 2, etc.)

Writing Style

1. Brief
2. Accurate
3. Clear

Look through articles in any available science journals to get an idea of how your research paper should read. As in other types of writing, a careful choice of words and writing style, especially in the opening and closing paragraphs, can make the difference between a dull and an interesting report.

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WRITING A BOOK REPORT

Requests for book reports are always met with groans and sighs. They seem to be necessary only to English teachers. Most students are quite willing to live out their lives without writing one or giving an oral report. Why do teachers insist? Because if they didn't, few of you would read anything other than the required textbooks -- except for an occasional paperback book that is guaranteed to be frowned on by school librarians. Although there are some who enjoy reading anything they can get their hands on in libraries or at home, among teenagers in general, few have the urge to read good literature.

Since it is not always possible to believe the student who says he or she has read ten books during the last semester -- honest -- the book report was created. It is proof, or should be, that the book described was read, cover to cover, by the person making the report, and that it was understood and appreciated by the reader. By the end of school in June, each student should be a better person for having read and reported on the required number of well-written books. That's the plan, anyway.

Read It and Don't Weep

Once you know that book reports are going to be in your future, develop a system that will help you turn in the right number of reports at the right time. A few guidelines may make your task easier:

1. Know the requirements for book reports before you choose a book to read.
2. Know the difference between fiction and non-fiction and how to recognize which is which in the library.
3. Keep notes:

   Fiction - plot, main characters
   Non-fiction - various ways the author tells about his subject

4. Form an opinion:

   Fiction - what is the quality of the story (good, bad, etc.)?
   Non-fiction - how well does the author put his facts across?

5. Decide whether or not you would recommend this book to other readers your age.

You Can't Tell a Book By Its Cover

Once you have chosen a book, don't bury it under your P.E. clothes at the bottom of your locker, but plan to read a chapter or more each day. Set aside the necessary time each day to do this and don't back out. Do it. As with all school assignments, they exist, they are there, you are expected to do them. Postponing, delaying, denying that assignments exist at all, will get you nowhere. The best attitude you can have is one of expected accomplishment. Plan your time so that you can do book reports on time and to the best of your ability.

Incidentally, when a book is your choice, and not required reading, there is no reason for you to pick one that does not interest you. Learn to read through the chapter headings (in the table of contents), read

the foreword if there is one at the beginning of the book, read the paper dust jacket if it is still on the book. Be alert for both new and old subjects that may interest you. You can even read the first chapter before you take the book out of the library. If a chosen book hasn't captured your interest after the first two or three chapters, return it and try again. You can't make a good report on such a book. The reading experience will be dull and you will find yourself doing other things rather than read the book.

A book that is chosen by your teacher as required reading must have something good about it. Your attitude should be a positive one. Look for a book's value and you will be rewarded; read it grudgingly and you will get little in return. Once you get the habit of reading, you will find yourself reading at every opportunity and enjoying it more.

Do you want to know what others know? Read. Do you want never to be lonely or bored? Read. Do you want passing grades in English? Write that book report.

The Party's Over

The book is read; the fun part is over, you think. Now you must organize your thoughts about the book and write a report. If your teacher does not have an outline for you to follow in making a book report, you may find these suggestions helpful:

FICTION: To keep from re-writing the entire book in your own words as your report, you must decide

1. Who the most important characters are
2. Which actions by them tell the main plot of the story
3. What is the high point of the story (climax)?

Once you have these things in mind, you can begin writing.

To these main points you can add your own feelings about the story, whether you were interested in the plot, whether it bored you, and so on. In addition, if space permits, you can tell an incident or two from the book that particularly interested you. If the story is a mystery, don't tell the ending and spoil the book for other readers.

NON-FICTION: This category covers a variety of types of books. It can include anthologies (a series of essays or articles), biographies and autobiographies (true stories about real people), histories, and single subject books written entirely about horses, automobiles, art, or music, etc. The list becomes very long.

To report on a book that covers a lot of information within its pages, you can condense its contents (give a short but informative report) by

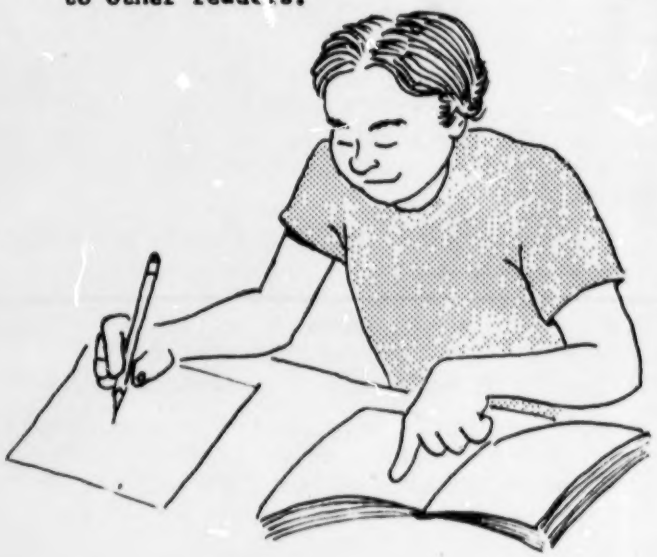
1. Giving a general description of what the book covers.

2. Describing the author's credentials for writing such a book (tell why he or she knows so much about this subject).

3. Telling about the portion of the book that was your particular interest.

4. Giving your opinion of the book.

5. Telling why you would or would not recommend the book to other readers.



All book reports will begin with the complete title of the book, name of the author or authors, and sometimes the name of the publisher and year of publication (all found on the title page at the beginning of the book). If information is available, you may wish to add some interesting facts about the author(s) ---- background (birthplace, education, interests), and possible reasons why they may have written on this particular subject.

What have you accomplished by all this?

(1) You have read a good book.

(2) You have written a critical report of its contents.

(3) You have, in fact, reviewed the book for other readers' benefit.

(4) You have added reading and writing experience beneficial to you

AND

(5) You have earned a grade!

LOOK MA, I'M CREATING!

Creating something new and original can be an uplifting experience. Any of you can do it, easily -- or with difficulty, depending on how you go about it. But it is possible. If you have enthusiasm for what you are creating, you will be looking for new ways of doing it, and you will probably be successful. Without enthusiasm and a special interest in what you are doing, your mind can draw a blank -- refuse to function, and failure is almost certain.

But take heart, even the most creative person becomes stuck once in awhile. We call it "having a mental block." Nothing is happening. Your brain refuses to do anything new or helpful about the job you have given it. You can't finish what you started, or even worse, you can't even get started!

Would it surprise you to know that there are definite ways to unlock your ideas and start them flowing? These ways are used by many successful writers, inventors, composers, artists -- all creative people -- at various times in their work. Knowing what they know about this creative process can help you. As you use this process and discover its value, you will find yourself applying it to other projects as well.

Read through the next few paragraphs and see what, if anything, sounds familiar. Perhaps you already have been using some of these ideas but were not completely aware of how they could work for you. Try to intentionally use these four steps as you tackle your next writing assignment.

1. PREPARATION

This can include sharpening pencils, finding a few sheets of unused paper, checking the refrigerator for snacks to keep the old body and brain going.

But that's not all.

Preparation means laying out a plan of action: Make a list of what you need to know and where to find this information (library, books at home, newspapers, etc.), or who to talk to (experienced people willing to share their knowledge with you). Estimate how long this will take, plus the length of time you can give yourself for writing the article (theme, composition, story) so that the finished product will be ready

WHEN DUE.

Preparation also means digesting what you have learned and recorded on reference cards or in the form of legible notes or outlines. Allow yourself time to read and reread this information; think about what you have found out, and rethink about it. Do all of this before you write so much as a single sentence of your paper.

Remember, you are looking for a new viewpoint about your subject, one that is yours alone. This is a time of exploration and discovery.

2. TAKE A BREAK

The second step in the creative experience, whether it be writing, inventing, or a research problem, is to let the project rest. That is, you put it aside for a time, go do something else, think about other things, and then come back to what you are doing with a fresh eye for what you have done so far. To rush through an assignment, not allowing for this second step, is to take a chance that your first impressions about your subject are the best....and the most complete. The chances of this happening are very few. This is especially true if you are looking for that new, original, unique (different) viewpoint or story twist, something your reader will not be expecting.

During this stage of incubation, for that's what it is -- a time of growth -- your conscious mind goes on to some other task and allows your preconscious mind to work without restriction or interference. What is your preconscious mind? That's the part of your thinking that goes on without your being aware of it. But it is there in your brain, working merrily along and available for consultation.

All you have to do is know it is there and let it make its contributions to your creativity. You are much like the hen who sits on her nest of eggs, perfectly confident that at the proper time chicks (ideas) will hatch. We see eggs; the hen sees chicks. She knows that she is warming and guarding her "nest of kin."

3. YOU'VE GOT IT!

You can be anywhere -- lying in bed just before getting up in the morning, riding your bike, feeding the dog, or even sitting in class, when suddenly you will begin to have new thoughts about your writing project.

Perhaps you'll have a new first sentence, a new first paragraph, or a better ending shaping in your mind. Be ready, because these new ideas will come, and you will want to write notes before you lose these thoughts.

What you think of may be very new and unusual, or so simple and obvious but still original that you will wonder why you didn't think of it before. In any case, it will be the creative boost you need to complete your assignment.

4. KNOW A GOOD THING WHEN YOU SEE IT

Finally, you are ready to put it all together. It is during this stage of writing that you verify or prove to yourself that the story or article is a good effort on your part and worthy of the assignment requirements. If you do not feel good about what you have written, perhaps your preparation was too hurried and too brief. Also, you may not have allowed yourself enough time for the second step -- the incubation period.

Take a good look at what you have written, and if there is still time before the assignment is due, consider rewriting parts of your paper. When the next assignment is announced, remember what may have gone wrong before and try the formula again. It will work better with practice.

ONCE AROUND THE BLOCK

If, in spite of following these four steps, you still have a mental block and are unable to think your way through your subject matter, try one of these:

1. Brainstorming

Set aside judgment (whether an idea is good, bad or just boring) and start writing down anything you think of that pertains in general or in particular to the subject at hand. The theory is that this action, if it results in a number of ideas, will produce the one good idea you can work with.

2. Putting it another way

There is always a better way to say something. If what you have written sounds awkward, uninteresting, or is unclear, start writing down as many ways of saying the same thing as you can.

Instead of asking yourself, "should I use this as a first sentence or, this one?", say to yourself, "how can this first sentence be better?" The first question limits creative work by offering only two choices; the second question opens up many more possibilities.

YOU'VE GOT ONE, USE IT!

Our brain never sleeps; it goes on thinking, organizing, sifting information and visualizing (dreams) even though our conscious mind is sleeping to allow our bodies to catch up with the day's activities. If we are not trying to use our brains more fully (and most of us are not), then we are overlooking an excellent source of inspiration and intelligence that is built-in and ready to go to work for us.

Use the creative process as I have outlined, consciously learning to rely on the unseen, but not unknown, resources of the mind. As you learn to write down your thoughts and ideas, you will find that you have a better understanding of your subject and thus will be able to pass that understanding on to others. It's a heady feeling of accomplishment.... one you don't want to miss.

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Flach, Frederic F.: A Reappraisal of the Creative Process. Psychiatric Annals 8:11-22, 1978.

Sagan, Carl: The Dragons of Eden. Random House, New York, 1977.

Stein, Morris I.: Methods to Stimulate Creative Thinking. Psychiatric Annals 8:65-75, 1978.

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